

Setting off on a gloria adventure

N2: Thursday 4 Dec 2008

Close-knit choir rise to Puccini's challenge under the baton of Janet Coxwell

THIS week we mourn the passing of Richard Hickox, that most celebrated of British choral conductors. The tribute was led by Janet Coxwell, our musical director for this evening, whose passion for teaching and choral conducting means that, like Hickox on the national scene, she herself pops up everywhere.

Music is very often a family affair. Not only was St Nic's packed with friends and family of the big choir, but being in a choir is to belong to a family with all its mixture of closeness, affection and rivalry.

Newbury Choral is open to anyone who loves sung music and the pleasure of belonging to something really worthwhile. The drawback is that they cannot all comfortably fit into any hall which Newbury has on offer.

So it was, that the whole of the 100-strong group was piled up in tiers against the east window, with sopranos tight in at the back.

This evening's adventurous offering was an early piece by Puccini, the *Missa de Gloria*, composed in Puccini's early days in Milan. Predating his operatic work it is full of "melodic freshness and movement" and sounds

Music

Newbury Choral Society, conducted by Janet Coxwell, at St Nicolas' Church, Newbury, on Saturday, November 29

quite operatic in a grandiose way. We must remember that Verdi was at the height of his powers at this time and the *Missa* has many echoes of the great man's style to which the large choir responded very well.

The principal soloists were Christopher Watson, tenor, and Quentin Hayes, baritone. Both took the stage after the interval with more re-discoveries starting with Balfé's setting of Longfellow's *Excelsior*. Very Victorian drawing room, the duet played it

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straight, despite the slightly Monty Python feel of the lines *Beware the pine-tree's withered branch, Beware the awful avalanche*.

Janet Coxwell then added her fine voice to Quentin's colourful baritone in another Victorian masterpiece, Ciro's Pinsuti's poignant and passionate ballade *Love thou*.

Robert Houssart was commissioned primarily to play St Nic's organ to accompany the *Missa*. Tuning problems, however, put paid to this and instead he chose for his solo a piano rendition of Bach's *Eighth Prelude and Fugue*, the one with six sharps or six flats, depending on which end you start at.

A fine choice, slow and thoughtful, Robert played with quiet gravity and with a slight hesitation which, despite the many spectators, gave it a feel of privateness.

A fascinating Family Reunion, therefore, and I look forward to Janet Coxwell's next direction with the Cecilia Consort on March 7, when they will get us on the right road for spring with Brahms *Liebeseleider*. Auf Wiedersehen.

PATRICK COGSWELL